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Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States

COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

WAR PAPER 30.

The Attack Upon and Defense of Fort Sanders, Knoxville, Tenn., November 29, 1863.

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COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPERS.

30

The Attack Upon and Defense of Fort Sanders, Knoxville, Tenn., November 29, 1863.

PREPARED BY COMPANION

Captain

ROBERT ARMOUR,

Late U. S. V.,

AND

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF DECEMBER 7, 1898.

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The Attack Upon and Defense of Fort Sanders, Knoxville, Tenn., November 29, 1863.

The very interesting paper on General W. P. Sanders, read by Companion Kniffin at a recent meeting of the Commandery recalled many incidents of the East Tennessee Campaign, and having witnessed the engagement in which General Sanders received his death wound while at the head of his command resisting the advance of the enemy, it has occurred to me that it might prove interesting to dwell for a short time upon what transpired in and around Knoxville during its seige by Longstreet in November, 1863, more particularly the attack upon and defense of the fort in which my regiment, the Seventy-ninth New York, commonly known as the "Highlanders," was stationed, and which, after his death, was named Fort Sanders in honor of his memory.

It will be remembered that after the battle of Gettysburg the Confederate General Longstreet had been sent with a strong force to reinforce General Bragg, and had arrived in time to participate in the battle of Chickamauga. Burnside's occupation of East Tennessee was a constant menace to Bragg's right flank and rear, and, notwithstanding the fact that the Army of the Cumberland had been reinforced by the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps, under General Hooker, and also that a strong force under Sherman was moving from Vicksburg for the same purpose, Bragg thought himself able to cope with the Union army without the aid of Longstreet, and, flushed with success, fell into the natural error of under-

rating his enemy's prowess, and Longstreet was detached and ordered to drive Burnside out of Tennessee, The Union forces were stretched along the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia railroad, the left being at Morristown in the northeast, while the right extended south as far as Loudon, where the railroad crosses the Holston river, about 35 miles southwest from Knoxville.

General Grant, upon learning of Longstreet's departure from Bragg's army, telegraphed Burnside that he would endeavor to create a diversion in his favor by an attack on Bragg. On November 12th Burnside replied that he would try and hold Longstreet in his front until the Army of the Cumberland was ready to strike.

Longstreet's movements proved more rapid than was expected, perhaps, for on the 13th our outposts at Loudon were attacked and a brisk engagement ensued, resulting in some loss on both sides. The enemy was driven back, and as our skirmishers advanced General R. B. Potter, our division commander, accompanied the line for the purpose of more clearly observing the situation.

A new chaplain, in the person of Rev. Crammond Kennedy, a young Scotchman, who was then called the "boy preacher," had reported to the Seventy-ninth a month previous. His trip from Stevenson, Tenn., through the enemy's country, was a memorable one, and he had had occasion to exhibit considerable pluck of the kind not usually displayed by or expected from non-combatants. Being at the front at this time he accompanied General Potter with the advance, but in attempting to return to his regiment alone he lost his way. He had ridden nearly down to Hough's Ferry, on the Holston a little more than a mile from Loudon in an air line, but by the windings of the river much farther. It was dusk; the

chaplain knew he had lost his way, and while watering his horse at a brook a woman appeared on the bank above him and with warning voice and gestures implored him to go back, adding that there were thousands of rebels down by the ferry, and that a party of four had just stopped at her house to inquire for a Yankee officer that had been observed prowling about. Kennedy at once turned back, but on reaching the road observed in a field to the left and posted behind a rail fence the four rebels who had been looking for him. He could not retreat, for the bulk of the rebel force was at the river; his only chance was to run the gauntlet of the fire of four rifles. As he drew near at a steady gallop he was ordered to halt, but throwing himself along his horse's back and giving him the reins, he dashed by, the bullets from the rifles flying harmlessly over his head. When he reached the brow of the hill a little ways beyond, he turned and waved his cap in token of farewell and pushed on and reached our lines without further molestation. That chaplain is now Crammond Kennedy, a prominent lawyer of our city, and, I am glad to say, a member of this Commandery.

The report by the chaplain of what he had seen and heard having been communicated to General Burnside, and that officer realizing that the enemy's crossing at Hough's Ferry would turn our right flank at Loudon, ordered the immediate evacuation of the latter, thus in all probability saving our force at that point from almost certain destruction.

Burnside at once telegraphed Grant that as his flank was turned and the posi.ion at Louden rendered untenable, he would concentrate his forces and fall back on Knoxville, and thus draw Longstreet as far from Bragg as possible. With his small force, Burnside could, of course, hope to do little more in the open field than to hold Longstreet in check long

enough to give us a chance to put Knoxville in a condition for defence, and his plans were made accordingly.

The next morning the advance of Longstreet's force crossed the river at Hough's Ferry, but was gallantly resisted by a portion of General White's division of the Twenty-third Corps and prevented from advancing far from the ferry that day. We learned from a number of prisoners, captured the day before, that Longstreet, to whose command they belonged, was on our front, and meant "to clean us out of East Tennessee," and that as the Union Army, then at Chattanooga, had been so thoroughly whipped in the battle of Chickamauga, we could not hope for help from that quarter, and on their theory our fate was sealed. As we had met Longstreet's veterans upon other fields, we realized that "foemen worthy of our steel" were before us; yet such was the confidence in General Burnside that the troops were not at all disconcerted. The retreat was continued, and early on the morning of the 16th firing on our right flank indicated that the enemy was on the Kingston road endeavoring to reach the cross-roads at Campbell's station before us and cut off our retreat to Knoxville, but we had the inside track, and the Second division of the corps under Colonel Hartranft reached the cross-roads at Campbell's Station first and was at once deployed across the Kingston road, over which the main body of the enemy was advancing. The artillery moved rapidly to the high ground east of the station, and my regiment was placed in support of Benjamin's battery of 20 pounders. From this point the entire field was in plain sight, and from it we witnessed the battle of Campbell's Station, a description of which I shall not attempt in this paper further than to say that it was stubbornly contested, and though a greatly superior force had been fought while we were on retreat, our lines had not been broken.

Longstreet recognized the importance of a victory at this point, for in his report he says: "If General Jenkins could have made his attack * * * or if he could have made it after the enemy had taken his second position, we must have destroyed his force, recovered East Tennessee, and in all probability captured the greater portion of the enemy's forces."

Darkness put an end to the engagement, and soon the march to Knoxville was resumed, and by midnight the troops were within a short distance of that city, which was entered on the 17th.

The principal defensive work was a fort half a mile west of the city and near the Kingston turnpike. It had been begun by the enemy during his occupancy of the town, and was called by them Fort Loudon. But little progress had been made towards its completion until it became evident that a retreat from Lenoir was necessary, when Captain O. M. Poe, then, and later, a prominent officer of the engineer corps, U. S. Army, and at one time a member of this Commandery, took measures to put the work in a defensive state. A large number of laborers had been employed night and day for that purpose, and when the troops arrived Lieut. S. N. Benjamin, then also chief of artillery, whom many of us well remember later as Asst. Adjutant General of the army, had been specially charged with its defense, and he requested that the Highlanders should be assigned to duty as the regular garrison. Benjamin was also at one time a member of this Commandery.

When we entered the fort an engagement was in progress about a mile distant on the Kingston road between the enemy's advance under General McLaw and our cavalry and mounted infantry under General W. P. Sanders of the Twenty-third Corps. That officer had been ordered to hold the enemy in check as long as possible in order that the troops arriving

might be placed in proper positions to resist attack. For several hours Sander's command held the enemy at bay, but was gradually driven in by superior numbers until the Confederates came within short range of the shells from our 20 pounders, when the engagement ceased for a while. In the afternoon the fight was renewed, and as the combatants were in plain sight about half a mile distant, we watched the operations with a great deal of interest. Benjamin's guns sent several shells into the enemy's lines, but the opposing forces were so close together that our own men were in as great danger from the shells as were the enemy, and Benjamin's firing ceased.

McLaw had been ordered by Longstreet to push on and force his way into the city, and, reinforcements arriving, he finally drove Sanders from his position, and we made all readiness to give the enemy a warm reception should he come within range of our rifles. General Burnside was looking over the parapet, watching the engagement, and when he saw Sanders driven back he went from point to point along the west front of the fort, encouraging the men and advising them to "keep cool, fire low, and be sure and hit something every time." But the enemy contented himself with driving back Sanders' force and occupying the crest of the hill. General Sanders, the gallant soldier, was mortally wounded while nobly performing his duty, and died a day or two afterwards, and our fort, as I have already mentioned, was named in honor to his memory. Just before dark it was observed that the ground to the northwest of the fort and about a mile distant was also occupied by the enemy, and our pickets were established on the north and west about 400 yards distant from the fort and about an equal distance from those of the enemy. Thus ended the first day of the siege.

In front of Fort Sanders there was a wire entanglement placed there by Lieutenant Benjamin, the wires strung from stump to stump in order to obstruct and break up the lines of an attacking force. The only portions of the fort at all in a defensive condition when we entered it were the west and a portion of the north fronts, and even in these no embrasures had been cut.

The second day of the siege the garrison was called up early, and at once began to work on the fort. With the appearance of daylight the opposing pickets began firing, and by noon bullets were flying quite lively, occasionally one whistling over the fort, and the movement of the enemy's troops toward our right was observed. In the afternoon a flag staff was raised in the fort, and the flinging of Old Glory to the breeze was the signal for hearty cheers. The enemy also saluted it with a furious fire of artillery, but, although many of the shells burst in and near the fort, they did little or no damage, and "Our flag was still there."

On the third day the enemy advanced his picket line, and the bullets were singing over the fort in very unpleasant frequency, which caused all hands, from the brigade commander down to the drummer boy, to duck and dodge in a manner not perhaps creditable to our soldiers.

On the fourth day of the siege only quarter rations were issued, and coffee rations wholly discontinued. The ingenuity of the boys was put to the test to provide substitutes. An article labeled "Jeff Davis' Substitute," purchased in the town at 75 cents per pound, was found to be simply a mixture of wheat and chicory—as big a fraud as its illustrious prototype.

On the fifth day two men of the picket relief were wounded, and it was found more prudent to change pickets under cover

of darkness, and the reliefs were made up at roll call, which was, under orders, required to be had at 5 o'clock each morning.

On the sixth day one of the cooks was killed while carrying rations to the outposts, about 5 o'clock in the evening. At nine o'clock the pickets of the second division, some distance to our right, were attacked and driven in, and the impression prevailed that a general attack was to be made.

On the seventh day a man of my company, who had just partaken of his frugal meal and was about to light his pipe, was struck by a minie bullet in the back of the neck and fell forward, as we supposed, dead. Almost immediately, however, he picked himself up and quietly spat out blood and the bullet into his hand. Mention is made of this case because of the fact that some months before the man had been tried by court martial for desertion, found guilty, and sentenced to be shot, and had been under guard awaiting the execution of the sentence, which had been duly approved and ordered. The excitement incident upon the enemy's advance, however, had caused some delay, and after the siege had commenced, the authorities appeared to be of the opinion that the taking of the lives of our men should be devolved upon the enemy, who appeared to be eminently well qualified for that duty, and ordered that all prisoners be sent to their companies; and company commanders were instructed to place them upon any duty more dangerous than another. This man had served several turns of duty at the outpost. The injury proved a severe one, but finally he was well enough to be removed to New York, and in time recovered, and is still in a good state of preservation, and is at present, and for many years past has been a prosperous and useful citizen of Maryland. This was shooting a man to save his life.

On the eighth day those on the right of our picket line discovered that the lines of the enemy had again been considerably advanced and there was no longer any chafing between the rival pickets as on former occasions; each side seemed now to realize that the situation was too serious for anything but hard knocks. Three more of our men were wounded in the fort, among whom was my first Lieutenant, Chas. Watson. The moon that evening was full and the night beautiful and clear. As we lay wrapped in our overcoats and blankets, listening and watching for the least movement of the enemy we could occasionally hear the sound of a pickaxe as it struck a stone. This at once drove all sentimental thoughts from our minds and brought us back from reveries of home and friends to the stern realities of our situation. It was cold, too, and as fires were interdicted, even the striking of a match prohibited, we found it difficult to keep warm. The sound of the digging told us in no uncertain tones that the climax was approaching, that the assault might soon be expected, and the great question decided whether we or the enemy should winter in Knoxville.

The morning of the tenth day opened clear and pleasant. One of the holes in the ground in front of the fort was occupied by two men who, to relieve the monotony of the hour, thought they would try to get a shot at the Johnnies. The incident has been thus related: "Campbell held his cap up on his ramrod while I had my gun levelled ready to fire; the reb's gun and my own spoke almost simultaneously, and Campbell exclaimed 'Damn it, I'm hit.' The Johnnie was sharp, and had aimed two feet or more *below* the cap; the wound had to be dressed in the little pit, as it would have been certain death to attempt to reach the fort before dark." At eight o'clock in the evening we heard great cheering or yelling within the

enemy's line, supplemented with music by their bands; when this quieted down "How are you, Vicksburg?" was asked by the rebel pickets, to which was replied "You haint got us yet." "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush;" some artillery firing was indulged in, but at midnight all was quiet. We afterward learned that the arrival of reinforcements to the enemy with a report that Bragg's army had beaten Grant was the cause of their rejoicing.

The eleventh day opened rainy and cold, and the mud in Fort Sanders was quite deep; some grumbling on that account; but a light-hearted fellow would break out with the refrain "We're happy because it can't last;" "Why it's all in the three years, boys." In the afternoon the enemy was observed moving large bodies of troops toward our right, and an assault in that direction was looked for, but night closed in without any demonstration; at eleven o'clock a general alarm was sounded. "Fall in, boys! They're coming! Every man to his post!" Little excitement followed, but a grim determination to do *all* that was possible was apparent. Our batteries fired a few shots, but as the enemy did not appear the firing soon ceased. Our pickets had been driven in and were now lying close up to the ditch of the fort, and it was evident that daylight would bring us face to face.

Lieut. Benjamin had prepared a number of 20-pounder shells to be used in case of attack; the fuses had been cut at 20 seconds and would explode very soon after reaching the bottom of the ditch. These shells had been laid in rows on the banquette tread, at various points on the west and north fronts of the fort, ready for instant use, and, very dangerous neighbors that they were, we often wished the "darned things" were somewhere else. Peering over the breastworks in the darkness failed to reveal the enemy of which we had seen or heard nothing since our pickets had been driven in.

We remained under arms all night, and care was taken that abundance of ammunition should be available; all spare rifles were loaded and placed in convenient places, and nearly all were double shotted as were also the 12-pounder howitzers with grape or canister, while "number four" stood with lanyard in hand ready to fire. In this condition the night was passed, but as darkness gave place to the gray dawn on the morning of the 29th, and twelfth day of the siege, we soon had news from the enemy; a gun was fired from their battery near the Armstrong House, used as Longstreet's headquarters, and this appeared to be the signal, for immediately their whole line of guns opened and for a few minutes we witnessed as fine a display of skyrockets as we had ever seen. Our experience for two years and a half had convinced us that the danger from shells was not always in keeping with their lusty voice, and realizing that their infantry could not advance while the shelling continued, we lay low and watched the fireworks. The shrieks of the murderous missiles were well calculated to shake the morale of men less accustomed to such music. At length the fire ceased, and we at once realized that we had business on hand! Then, as has been beautifully said, "was a time for patriots to bethink them of the flag—that wonderful fabric, woven of air and sunshine—the air of freedom and the sunshine of God's hope—men's hearts the shuttles, and all history the loom; it was a time for patriots to bethink them of the flag."

The officer's cry, "Now, boys, look sharp! and in the gray dawn the long line of brave fellows was seen pushing towards us, and to death! Volleys of musketry and the yells of the enemy broke upon our ears, and a glance revealed that the northwest bastion was the point to which they intended to give attention first.

Not a shot was fired from our fort until the enemy were within fifty yards of the muzzles of our pieces; the artillery, depressed to the lowest point, hurled double and triple charges of canister into the masses of the enemy. Our men, intelligent as they were and needing but little encouragement from their officers, were pouring a destructive fire into the enemy; some over the cotton bales which had been placed on top of the parapet, others through the embrasures occupied by the artillery, while from the flank a destructive fire was poured upon them from the rifles of the Highlanders, as well as from those of the Second Michigan and a portion of the Twenty-ninth Massachusetts, which had been moved to the north front of the fort and adjoined us on the right, from which points they could sweep the ditch with their rifles. While the excitement was great, all buckled down to their work and encouraged one another by shouting "Give it to them, boys! Remember Vicksburg! Remember James Island!" Those were battles in which the conditions were reversed; they then were inside and we were on the outside, and in those attacks many of our bravest and best gave up their lives. Hoping to escape our murderous fire many of the enemy jumped into the ditch. Now was Benjamin's opportunity; with a piece of portfire he lighted the short fuse of the 20 pound shells already referred to and rolled them down among the living mass below, and as they burst yells, shrieks and groans attested their bloody work! At length the enemy's fire slackened, and we could see many of them hurrying to the rear. A cheer went up from our throats which was instantly answered by a chorus of yells from a fresh column of the enemy, who, nothing daunted by the repulse of their first line crowded up to the assault.

The wires trip many and break up their lines; many fall to

rise no more, but the living press forward. The assaulting party is now raining bullets through the embrasures and along the edge of the parapets. But the fire from within is as lively as before, for there were as earnest hearts within the fort as without—many, who, though adopted citizens, had patriotically taken up arms in defense of the Republic, to assist in upholding the dear old flag, proud of being among those who battled for the preservation of the Union in its integrity, and the flag in its glory, and fully determined that the inhabitants of the hills of Tennessee should be as proud of their achievements as have ever been the inhabitants of the hills of Scotland, whence they hailed, of the achievements of their forefathers. The brave rebels crowded up to the ditch as the first line had done, and death, in the bullets from our rifles, claimed many for his own. Shells were bursting in the ditch, literally tearing the poor fellows to pieces and scattering the fragments far and near, and to most of those who entered, it was indeed the last ditch. A yell louder than usual causes us to glance in the direction of the sound. There on the very angle of the bastion we see a rebel flag rising above the exterior crest, and soon appears the head and shoulders of the bearer! Brave fellow! but his last moment was at hand, for a number of rifles were discharged, and with the flag staff clutched in a death grip, he rolls to the bottom of the ditch, riddled with Yankee bullets. Another tries to succeed him, and shares the same fate. Still others crowd on. They have formed a temporary bridge over the ditch, and are making desperate efforts to scale the parapet. At one point two of the enemy appeared within a few feet of a sergeant, who, in the excitement, had discharged his piece before withdrawing his ramrod. Unable to reload, he clubbed his rifle and flung it at them, hitting neither of them. The next instant he had seized an

axe, and hurled it at the approaching foe; it hit and knocked one down, and the other fell at the same moment, pierced by a bullet. Again the rebel fire slackens a little, and a few of our men jump on the parapet at the angle, and capture a rebel flag which some brave fellows still insisted on planting upon the fort. A few more spasmodic efforts and the enemy's fire ceases; soon we notice they are retreating, and the command is given to cease firing. Those of the enemy within reach of our voices are called upon to surrender, and they enter the fort by way of the embrasures. One fellow, an Irishman, with a wounded arm, said: "Yees Yankees is divils! If yees can't shoot us yees'll thry to break our necks over the d—d wires." Another, as he reached for a light for his pipe, said: "Bedad, boys, Gineral Longstreet tould us we'd be in Knoxville the night, but, be Jasus, he didn't think it 'ud be as prisoners of war."

The sun not yet far above the horizon and yet how much had been crowded into those early hours of that Sabbath morning. Three brigades of the flower of Longstreet's veteran army had been hurled against a handful of men comparatively with the knowledge that the point of attack was the key to Knoxville and must be captured, and they had displayed bravery and courage never surpassed by soldiers. But notwithstanding the persistence of their attack, they had signally failed. It may not be said that the failure was because of lack of courage, for, as has been already said, that was surely not wanting. But they were opposed by men as brave as they equally determined that if Knoxville was taken the enemy must enter by a different route; and, protected by earthworks, we had great advantage and were enabled to inflict upon our enemy losses out of all proportion to that suffered by ourselves. The enemy's loss, as given in their official

returns, was 129 killed, 458 wounded, and 226 prisoners, aggregate 813. Besides this, we captured three battle flags and nearly 600 stand of small arms, and when it is stated that the loss sustained on that November morning by the defenders of Fort Sanders was only about 20, of whom 4 killed and 5 wounded belonged to my regiment, it should be readily understood why the Confederates, who almost invariably had the choice of position, and very often fortifications to protect them, found it possible to battle against superior numbers and continue the war for 4 years.

From an article by Confederate General Jones, published in the Philadelphia Times in 1884, we find that the order of assault was "First: Wofford's Georgia and Humphrey's Mississippi brigades were selected to make the assault, the first on the left, the second on the right; this latter followed closely by three regiments of Bryan's brigade; the Sixteenth Georgia to lead the first and the Thirteenth Mississippi the second assaulting column. Second: the brigades to be formed for the attack in columns of regiments. Third: The assault to be made with fixed bayonets and without firing guns, etc., etc."

General Jones gives reasons for attacking Fort Sanders instead of a weaker point, but though interesting this paper is already too long to admit of many quotations. In a footnote he says: "The Seventy-ninth New York had their revenge, if they wanted it, at Knoxville for their reception at Secessionville, S. C., on the 16th of June, 1862. There the positions were reversed."

In referring to this assault the Southern historian, Pollard, in his "Third Year of the War," says: "In this terrible ditch the dead were piled 8 or 10 deep. Never excepting at Gettysburg was there in the history of the war a disaster adorned with the glory of such devout courage as Longstreet's repulse at Knoxville."

Two days later news of General Grant's victory at Chattanooga was embodied in a congratulatory address by General Burnside. Help was on the way and would soon reach us, but renewed vigilance was urged, as the enemy might make another attempt to capture Knoxville and ourselves before the arrival of relief, but though the enemy appeared as active as ever, and on the 2d December pushed their lines still farther forward, no attack was made, and on the morning of the 5th, and the eighteenth day of the siege, it was found that the enemy, during the night,

> "Had folded their tents like the Arabs,
> And silently stolen away."

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